



MAMMAL NEWS

www.mammal.org.uk

Autumn 2015 • Issue 173



**MUNTJAC • BAT MITIGATION • FAMILY MURIDAE • RED SQUIRRELS
DOMESTIC CATS • IRISH BADGERS • SPOTTED SOUSLIKS**

Spotted Sousliks – Rescue from the Brink

Mark Hows visits a conservation success story in south east Poland.

Photographs by Mark Hows, Mark@hows.org.uk

The spotted souslik (*Spermophilus suslicus*) is found across Russia, Ukraine and Belarus but, in Europe, it is only found in Poland. It is one of only two ground squirrels found in Europe; the other being the European souslik (*Spermophilus citellus*). Its habitat in Europe differs from the rest of its range where it prefers steppe grasslands, which are not present in Poland, where instead it utilises grazing pasture.



We drove to the small Souslik Hills (Susle Wzgórza) reserve close to the Ukrainian border. We quickly found burrows, runs and evidence of crop damage in the bordering fields; fortunately this crop is used as a buffer to the commercial crops. The small reserve holds in excess of a thousand sousliks and being diurnal it was not long before we spotted our first heads poking out of the burrows.

Krzysztof explained the lifecycle of the souslik and also explained about the history

Changing farming practices since Poland emerged from communism have adversely affected the souslik's preferred habitat and by the mid 1990s, its population had dropped markedly with Europe's total population down to under 100 individuals. Although already on Poland's endangered list, it was only then that a recovery plan was initiated.

I recently contacted the leader of the recovery project, Krzysztof Próchnicki, through a mutual friend and he invited me over to see the project reserves, translocation and hopefully the sousliks themselves.

Sousliks hibernate from October to April so my wife and I planned a holiday for August and arranged to meet up with Krzysztof for a guided tour during our stay. We had perfect weather for our visit and we met up with Krzysztof and his son, who interpreted for us, in the small town Tomaszów Lubelski.



of the project and how the last remnants of habitat were protected in the 1990s creating the 8 current souslik reserves. Some of these reserves have been re-populated by translocating individuals from the largest

population at Popówka and there are now approx. 10,000 sousliks distributed between the reserves. The success of the project is largely due to the careful cattle grazing management of the reserves and the continued legal protection of the sousliks. While we were there we saw harriers, one of the major predator of these animals. Their other main predators are domestic cats and dogs.

We spent some time quietly watching the sousliks from the edge of the reserve and easily saw dozens of them. Krzysztof mentioned that this would have been difficult if they had not mown the reserve especially



for our visit.

We also visited Popówka to see the translocation process in action. Here we saw an unmown reserve where cattle had just been brought in to graze and we did not see any sousliks apart from those trapped for translocation, because of the height of the vegetation. The individuals caught for translocation are being added to some very small colonies outside the main 8 reserves. With time moving on we bid our host farewell knowing the future of the spotted souslik in Europe was in safe hands and our host gave us a whole selection of books and information on the souslik project so now I just need to brush up on my Polish a bit before reading them. Many thanks to Krzysztof for his hospitality in